

One-Pager on Governor Barbour's Early Childhood Initiatives

Governor Barbour believes a child's parents are the first and most important teachers in the child's life. Parents need information to help them understand the ages and stages of early childhood development and its connection to life-long learning. For parents who choose child care services, better information is needed on how to choose a quality early care and education program.

Mississippi has about 1,700 licensed early care and education programs, and 80 percent of four-year-olds are already in some sort of child care program. The key is to make existing programs better so our kids will be ready to learn.

Currently, a Licensure Certificate from the Mississippi Department of Health denotes that child care centers have met state health and safety standards. The Licensure Certificate does not reflect the quality of services or the educational content provided to children attending the center.

Two early childhood initiatives proposed in the Governor's Education Reform Act of 2006 and a third in the Education Reform Act of 2007 offer mechanisms to help parents and grandparents raise children who are ready to learn upon school entry. These initiatives would set criteria defining what types of services are high quality, provide a system to license day care facilities and then reward licensed early care and education programs that meet the criteria.

The Legislature did not approve funding for the following initiatives proposed in 2006, but the Governor is likely to push for their passage again in the next session:

- **The Mississippi Child Care Resource and Referral System**

Would provide parents with information and resources regarding early childhood development and its importance, as well as information on how to choose quality early care and education programs for their children.

- **The Mississippi Child Care Quality Step System**

Would provide a system for incorporating the state's early learning guidelines, establish criteria to define "high quality," such as innovative learn-to-read programs, provide quality bonuses for programs meeting criteria, establish teaching standards for classroom quality and promote professional development for teachers beyond what is currently required.

The following initiative proposed by the Governor in the 2007 legislative session and likely to be proposed again in 2008, would allow all existing licensed early care and education programs in Mississippi to apply for funds to enhance or start a new program serving four-year-old children.

- **The Early Learning Collaboration Grant Program**

Allow schools, Head Start and public, private and faith-based early care and education programs meeting grant criteria and standards to apply for funds to enhance current programs or create new learning opportunities for four-year-old children. The emphasis would be on a program's educational content, particularly reading, and how it helps very young students begin to learn how to learn.